

VZCZCXRO6923  
PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHDH RUEHKUK RUEHROV  
DE RUEHLB #0980/01 2451317  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 021317Z SEP 09  
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5644  
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE  
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 3578  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 4112  
RHMCSUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL  
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000980

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR IO A/S EBRIMMER  
P FOR AWELLS/RWALLER  
S/P AJAIN  
DRL/NESA FOR JBARGHOUT  
PARIS FOR DNOBLES  
USUN FOR AWOLFF/EGERMAIN/ASCHEDLBAUER  
NSC FOR DSHAPIRO/MMCDERMOTT  
DOD/OSD FOR FLOURNOY/KAHL/DALTON  
OVP FOR HMUSTAFA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/01/2019

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [LE](#) [IS](#)

SUBJECT: BERRI SUPPORTS NEW SHIA RELIGIOUS GROUP WHILE  
RELYING ON "THE RESISTANCE"

REF: 2008 BEIRUT 1308

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri supported the launch of a new, "moderate" Shia clerical establishment, the Independent Clerical Gathering, on August 20. Subsequently, on August 31, in his annual address on the anniversary of the disappearance of Shia cleric Imam Musa al-Sadr, Berri called "the resistance" a Lebanese necessity. We believe Berri is searching for ways to revive his ailing Amal party, all without provoking a challenge from his larger Shia ally, Hizballah. End summary.

BEHIND THE SCENES,  
BERRI SUPPORTS NEW SHIA  
CLERICAL ESTABLISHMENT...

2. (C) On August 20, a group of self-proclaimed "moderate" Shia clerics launched the "Independent Clerical Gathering" (ICG). In its press statement, the ICG identified its primary objective is to provide "breathing room" and represent the views of independent clerics -- a discreet challenge to Hizballah's claims of sole religious legitimacy in the Shia community. The ICG is led by Sheikh Ahmad Taleb, the independently wealthy son-in-law of renowned Shia cleric Sayyed Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah. (Note: Although some presume Fadlallah to be Hizballah's spiritual leader, he has rejected the key Khomenei principle of "wilayat al-faqih" and his current relationship to the organization is unclear. End note.) Representatives of both Fadlallah and opposition-allied Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri attended the event. Contacts at NGO Hayya Bina (a USG-grant recipient) tell us Berri's involvement with the ICG went beyond sending a representative to the launch and extended to editing portions of the ICG mission statement. The Higher Shia Council (the official Shia clerical institution supported by the Lebanese government), reportedly took punitive financial actions against those clerics participating in the ICG.

...BUT CONTINUES  
TO SUPPORT "THE RESISTANCE"  
-----

13. (SBU) Subsequently, on August 31 in his keynote speech commemorating the disappearance of Shia cleric Imam Musa al-Sadr, Berri reiterated his claim that "the resistance is a necessity" to force Israel to withdraw from occupied Lebanese territory. He also called on the government to refuse attempts at permanent Palestinian resettlement ("tawteen") in Lebanon and to address the economic and social needs of Lebanese citizens. Berri's rhetoric was similar to his 2008 speech (reftel) and incorporated the usual platforms of defending the resistance and improving the daily lives of the Shia community. The audience included prominent Amal and Hizballah parliamentarians and opposition supporters, Shia cabinet ministers, Shia clergy, as well as representatives of Druze leader Walid Jumblatt.

COMMENT  
-----

14. (C) Nabih Berri's Amal party has lost much of its prestige and dominance as the representative of the Shia community to Hizballah. While Berri maintains a political alliance with Hizballah, it is clear that he is the weaker partner in the relationship. His attempts to recapture supporters and boost his own leadership credibility within the Shia community could explain part of his motivation to lend support to new groups that are emerging, such as the ICG. However, it is

BEIRUT 00000980 002 OF 002

unlikely Berri would openly criticize or provoke a challenge from Hizballah.

SISON